



Delivered by Knight Foundation president Alberto Ibargüen at the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce in recognition of the “Sand in my Shoes” Award on October 4, 2023.

(as prepared for delivery)

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, my fellow Miamians: thank you.

Joe, Dave, Amy, Steve, Rudy, Alfred, thank you. And thank you, all, for being here tonight. I’m honored by the award and humbled by your presence. And I love the idea that, like sand in your shoes – or your bathing suit – once Miami is in your system, it’s almost impossible to get it out. And why would you want to?

The point of this evening is to celebrate the remarkable arc of this amazing city. I want to use these few minutes to pay tribute to the Miami we have shaped ... and the Miami of our dreams.

Susana and I moved here from New York in 1995. From the perspective of tonight, that feels like the end of the beginning of Miami’s history. Miami had long ceased to be a southern town or just a winter haven. The city had grown multicultural and pluralistic, proving that diversity is easy but inclusion is hard because inclusion requires a shared vision and shared power. And any of you who’ve read Nick Griffin’s “The Year of Dangerous Days” and remember Maurice Ferré’s leadership know that by 1980, this place was roiling with controversy. And then Hurricane Andrew changed the demographics of the county almost overnight, with raw tensions that boiled over around Elián González.

All of this and more only served as a base for the transformation of our town into what Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter wrote about in the late ‘90s. She saw Miami as a city whose importance had grown beyond its borders. Our city had become a connecting place in a much wider network of interests. And then came the life-altering power of digital technology that has made the end of the Florida peninsula suddenly accessible to the world.

And we were ready.

Some of it was by accident. Much of it was because of leaders like the people who’ve been recognized for the sand in their shoes in past years. It is a testament to Miami’s newness and penchant for change that, out of the 43 honorees in the history of this award, I have actually met 36. I say that not to underscore how old I am, but how young and open Miami is to people who came here late but were welcomed with an enthusiasm and sincerity that makes my heart full tonight.

Senator Bob Graham once said to me that my whole life was training for understanding Miami as normal. I am the son and husband of immigrants, a man who learned from his Cuban father to love America and the English language, and from his Puerto Rican mother to never forget my roots and relish the Spanish language and Latin culture. I grew up in a very Jewish town in the Northeast and New York City, lived and worked in Venezuela and Colombia, formed a law firm with my African-American partner and married an Argentine, the love of my life, with whom I shared 53 happy years, half of them in Miami.

I am a lucky man!

I have had the chance to work in business and in philanthropy for the advancement of communities where I've felt at home. I've been a member of this Chamber and have had the chance to serve on boards of companies like PepsiCo, American Airlines and Norwegian Cruise Lines, which make such a difference in the economic life of this community.

I've also had the good fortune to chair the board of PBS and, in my time here, I have led two community institutions, the Herald newspapers and Knight Foundation, both of which have allowed me the opportunity to work with people I admire, like my colleagues from the Herald and, of course, from Knight Foundation who are here tonight, including our chair, Frank Borges, trustees Sue Kronick, Adriana Cisneros, Ana Codina and Ramona Hood, and my friend and colleague for the last 21 years, Liset Huff.

I have had a chance to make a difference – and the way to make a difference in the evolution of a community's character is NOT to tell it what to do but to leverage or accelerate the trends already in motion. So, when we at the Herald reported on life in Miami, we wanted it to read by people who would say, "Yes, this newspaper is written about my town and for people like me."

That was my focus as publisher of the Herald and El Nuevo Herald. Later, at Knight Foundation, we looked at what was already happening in town and decided first to make art and culture general in Miami. We did that by becoming the second or third largest private donor to almost all of the cultural institutions in town and also one of the biggest sponsors of original art, music, and theater.

Later, we focused on leveraging the entrepreneurial instincts of our community of immigrants and exiles, and were early funders of digitally-focused technology. That work has evolved and we're now an important sponsor of engineering training at FIU, Miami Dade College and UofM. Why? Because all of that tech business that's coming into our town needs quality engineering.

You succeed by paying attention to the community and to change with it.

The great vitality of our city springs from the adaptability of our people. The most successful competitors — be they people, organizations, cities — are not always the smartest, strongest, or fastest — although I think we Miamians are pretty smart, strong, fast. The most successful

are the most adaptable. Miami, with our diverse, creative, and ambitious population, exemplifies this principle. We are a city of strivers, ingrained with an entrepreneurial spirit.

Consider that in the context of our new era, defined by digital transformation. Miami may not be able to compete globally as an industrial or manufacturing powerhouse. But with the growth of tech, we can go toe-to-toe in the world and compete with any city, especially when we expand access to digital resources. This digital transformation has opened new doors for our small businesses, promising growth and impact on an unprecedented scale. That is our future.

And that journey is just beginning. And it's ours to lose.

Why say it that way? Because if we don't also pay attention to issues like sea level rise, housing affordability, a shrinking middle class and public education to train a workforce that can continue to adapt, we can lose what we have built.

And it won't surprise you to know that I also think a major, even existential, threat to our democracy is that, while we have more information available to us than ever, we have less – and less reliable – news about our affairs at the base of our democracy than ever before because the business model we've used to inform us has been stressed by the possibilities made available by technology. Our democracy is designed around geography and until now, so was information. The reach of a newspaper or a radio or tv signal was roughly about the same area as a city or a few congressional or commission districts, all defined by the same geography. The result was good local coverage of what was happening at the base of democracy.

Not so much any more.

Our information structure is not limited by geography and we haven't found a way, yet, to replace the checks and balances that we used to have with the local press. I'm not arguing for newspapers but I am concerned that citizens have lost a general sense of community information and a consequent feeling of common purpose, a common set of expectations about what's happening in our town.

I'm proud to tell you that Knight Foundation has been leading the search for a business model for local news. We just recently announced our participation in what I expect will be a billion-dollar investment in many experiments in local news operations around the country. And we were original funders of the American Journalism Project that has, so far, stood up more than 40 digital-based local news operations around the country. Time will tell if we can fix the problem.

These are daunting issues. But they won't defeat us unless we ignore them.

And they won't defeat us with the leadership we have in this community. As I look around, I see a major, even seismic, generational shift in business leadership. I welcome that new leadership

and I welcome the new determination I hear among young business leaders to solve the problems my generation did not. I not only have hope for a better Miami, I have faith in them.

I'll close with a note of thanks that I think is a typical Miami story. About ¾ of the people who live here came from someplace else. That has been a curse sometimes, when trying to find common purpose. But it can also be our greatest strength in building a base that is broad enough to weather change. And it comes down to people taking action to make a better life.

The hero in my story is actually my grandmother. She was not yet 40 years old when, as a young widow with four children, she decided in 1930 – in the middle of the Great Depression, during Machado in Cuba and school closures – to come to the United States, seeking to educate her kids.

I thought about her when I went to Cuba during Pope Benedict's visit and took this photograph of the Cuban countryside. [Show photo] I imagine it must have looked just about the same when she left 93 years ago. And I wondered whether she could possibly imagine the consequences of what she was doing.

She might have imagined the lives of her children who would grow up to be businessmen, an architect and an engineer. But how could she imagine that her decisions would lead one day to her grandson signing the membership book of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an organization that was started by John Adams and which counted George Washington and Thomas Jefferson among the early members and later Albert Einstein and Nelson Mandela? Or that one day he'd oversee the investment of more than two billion dollars of Jack Knight's money in good causes for society, or stand before you with sand in his shoes?

I haven't forgotten what she did for me or the courage it took. All of us together, let's never forget what others did so we could build the Miami of our dreams.

Thank you.